

Out of Sight – Out of Mind

“Exploring the Critical Issues of Leaving Children on School Buses”



Publication History –
First Edition 2007

Author –
Kathleen Furneaux, PTSI

Technical Editors –
Jean Zimmerman, Supervising Physical Therapist, West Palm Beach County Schools
Dona Beauchea, Driver Trainer, Baldwinsville Central Schools
Elizabeth Hughes, Transportation Safety Consultant

Editors –
Michele Cooper, PTSI
Pamela Anne Page, PTSI

Graphic Design –
Ron Streeter

Formatting –
Ryan Mastroccio

Special Thanks To –
Grant Reppert, and the Gwinnett County Public Schools, Transportation Department, GA
Nancy Wescott, and the Baldwinsville Central School District, Transportation Department, NY
Phyllis Stoddard, and the Oneida Central School District, Transportation Department, NY
Edessa Crippen
Bethany Overbaugh
Johnathon O'Connor
Brianna O'Connor
Alexis Furneaux

Disclaimer
Although the information and recommendations contained in this curriculum have been compiled from sources believed to be reliable, the Pupil Transportation Safety Institute makes no guarantee as to, and assumes no responsibility for, the correctness, sufficiency or completeness of such information or recommendations. Other or additional safety measures may be required under particular circumstances.

© PTSI 2007 Materials and information contained in this curriculum are the property of the Pupil Transportation Safety Institute.

PTSI has given permission for reproduction of the participant workbook as needed for instruction of this curriculum.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

“Exploring the Growing Problem of Leaving Children on School Buses”

Everyday drivers and attendants are leaving children on school buses across America, with serious if not tragic outcomes. Is the recent increase in incidence simply improved media coverage of an old problem? Perhaps, but whether you believe that this is a new problem or an old one, the number of incidents are alarming. Alarming enough to take a closer look at what may really be happening out on our school buses.



Training Objectives

By the end of our training today, the participant will be able to:

1. Look at the why behind the problem and name two reasons why it happens.
2. Discuss the results of the problem and list three potential outcomes.
3. Explore solutions to the problem and state one that will work in your operation.

The Problem



Sleeping and Hiding Children are being left on school buses. There seems to be no identifiable trends or patterns. Experienced and inexperienced school bus drivers alike display a brief lack of focus that results in a child being left on the bus. Gender is not an issue, and incidents are being reported all across the country. The one common denominator – the challenging environment of the school bus. The problem is growing. Children grades K through 3 and children with disabilities are those most at risk. They are small, impetuous, physically quick, and lack an understanding of potential dangers.

In spite of transportation professional's training and educational efforts, the problem continues to impact our operations. It is no coincidence that we are also facing:

- Smaller children are able to hide easily
- Longer bus rides for small children
- Social pressures on drivers and attendants that result in distractions



When we ask the children why they might possibly get off the school bus seat and hide on the bus, they said:

- “We play it everyday - I know all the hiding spots on the bus!”
- “My driver doesn’t tell us not to, so I guess its ok...”
- “It’s cooler down there when it’s hot.”
- “There’s no room on the seat!”

Tragic Results

Outcomes of leaving children on a school bus are often tragic. The patterns are predictable, and completely avoidable by the driver or attendant taking 30 seconds to check their bus thoroughly for children left behind. Results vary from traumatized, injured or dead student; outraged or grieving parents, negative media coverage, reactive school district administrators and bus staff discipline action, all the way to litigation.

The losses run deep in these unfortunate situations. Children’s lives are lost, parent’s trust is broken, there is a loss of public confidence and perceptions become negative. We loose a good staff member, and we loose the ability to experience normalcy in our operations. No one is left untouched by the incident.

***Checking for
children left on the
bus is the final step
in the unloading
process.***

Contributing Factors

Attitude – When drivers and attendants discuss this issue of leaving children on their buses, the number one response is that they can not conceive of ever leaving one of their children on the bus, and can not understand how anyone could. The inability to conceive of this ever happening to them prevents them from effectively preparing to prevent it. The lack of fear works against the necessary mental “reprogramming” needed.

Distraction – Drivers and attendants are faced with a barrage of distractions both internal and external. The demands of family, community, and the job may result in distractions internally, as they focus on the after school soccer game, picking up the dry-cleaning, what to cook for dinner, the overdue car payment and many other things they deal with on a daily basis. Externally, they are faced with the

challenge of managing both the demanding traffic environment and the demanding unsafe behavior of their passengers. This bombardment on the focus of the driver and attendant may result in route hypnosis, incomplete pre-trips, children left on the bus and more.

Interior of the Bus – The interior of the bus works against the efforts of the driver and attendant to see children left behind. The dark shadows and glare spots created by bright sunshine make it close to impossible to see a child on the floor. The tinted windows, dark garages, and bus ports, make it even darker. Dark colored upholstery and flooring complete the difficult visual environment enhanced by inadequate and poorly placed lighting. This is a challenging combination to locate a hiding child in.



Disconnect – As school bus drivers and attendants, the primary task is to drive around and pick-up children and put them on the bus. So the sight of a child on the bus does not send up red flags – it is what you do for a living! In addition, our society’s response to a sleeping child is far from one of alarm or fear of danger. In fact it normally gives us a “warm-fuzzy” feeling. When a child falls asleep on your bus, the visual cue will most likely not be one of alert. This lack of cognitive triggers may allow a driver or attendant to look at a child but not actually see them, especially when combined with an internal distraction.

Over-Focused on Process – Tasks that are repetitive in nature often result a numbing state of mind. The driver and attendant become so task oriented that they are not actively concentrating on what they see or hear during the task. New technologies are helpful, but may result in a potentially dangerous over-reliance situation. The driver and attendant may become so intent on operating the technology that they



forget the purpose for walking to the rear of the bus to shut the mechanism off – looking for children.

Timing – Many incidents of leaving children on school buses reportedly happen before returning to the bus garage. Many operations allow staff to stop to use restroom facilities, or purchase a drink on the way back to the bus garage. If a child is still on the bus they often will awaken and leave the school bus to wander around in very dangerous places. The child-check must be performed at the end of the route by finding the nearest safe place to pull over and check the bus thoroughly.

Solutions

Looking for children left on the bus is part of the loading and unloading process. It should be treated with that level of importance

The answer/s to the problem of children being left on the school bus are complex. Proper attention on the tasks of deploying the “child check” system and physically getting down to near floor level to check for children must be done as part of the loading and unloading process.



“Search and Rescue” Operation

It is the final step in the comprehensive unloading process, and should be treated with the same level of importance. It is not to be part of the post trip inspection. If you wait to perform the check for children there – it may be too late. A quick stop at the local mini-mart on the way back to the bus garage after the last drop-off, for a cold drink and restroom break will be just enough of an interruption to awaken a small child, who panics and runs off the bus into harms way. Assume there is a child on the bus and perform a “search and rescue” operation! The determination associated with a search will serve your goals in more efficient ways.

- Give up the notion that you couldn’t possibly leave a child on the bus – you could!
- Look at the interior of your bus and note the challenges in the floor coloring, lighting etc.
- Stay focused and mentally connected to finding a child left behind in the unloading process
- Tell the children that it is not good to sleep on the school bus, and if they see a friend asleep to notify the driver
- When using technology devices, do not over focus on the process of disarming the device and forget to look for children
- Look for children immediately after the last child is dropped off - never wait to check for children back at the bus garage or parking lot.

The Message

The message here is simple really – looking for children left on a bus is not an easy task. Committed, well-trained transportation professionals all across the country are struggling with this issue. If you are just “looking” for a child, you may fall short of your goal to never leave a child on your bus.

Review

1. Name two reasons why children may be left on a school bus.

2. List three potential outcomes of leaving a child on a school bus.

3. Explore solutions to the problem and state one that will work in your operation.

Conclusion

Leaving children on school buses is a growing problem! It is something that can happen to you – to any of us! Understanding the challenges with the interior of your bus, the mental complacency and distractions, and timing concerns will provide an opportunity for you as school bus drivers and attendants to “re-program”. Use the knowledge of the challenges you face as the first step in prevention. Take 30 seconds to look for a child left on the bus, and do it carefully. Stop the epidemic of children left on school buses.

It only takes 30 seconds to save a child's life...won't you spend that time looking for a child?

PTSI Thanks You for All You Do
to Transport Children Safely!

